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SUBJECT: MEDVEDEV TAKES PRESIDENTIAL OATH

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Presidential power passed from Putin to Medvedev at the stroke of noon today. The simple but majestic ceremony of oath-taking took place in the Kremlin's ornate Andreyevskiy Hall before two thousand of the political elite.

Putin gave his farewell address, using the occasion for a final victory lap that touted his accomplishments, publicly reminded Medvedev to stay the "already chosen course" for the country's development, and ambiguously pledged to "look out for Russia" for the "rest of his life." Medvedev's brief inauguration speech hit all the right notes, as he pledged himself to protecting the citizenry's rights and freedoms, providing security, and promoting respect for the law as the overriding goals of his presidency. Ultimately two images - that of Medvedev's solo triumphal march down the red carpet as Russia's new president and then of the "tandem" leadership receiving the salute of the Presidential guard - capture the innate tension in this period of transitional power, sending mixed messages to the population and the global audience about the shape of politics to come.

Invitation Only

¶2. (SBU) Pomp and pageantry harkening back to an Imperial past exemplified Medvedev's inauguration, like that of Yeltsin and Putin before him. With a ceremony held in the magnificent Kremlin palace, bedecked with red carpet and ramrod-stiff sentries, Medvedev's "coronation" boasted all of the symbols of traditional Russian power save the crown of Monomakh - 30-gun salute, a parade by infantry and cavalry soldiers, the ornate Presidential Seal, and the celebratory service at the Annunciation Cathedral. (We have not yet seen a public sign that the final symbol of power - the nuclear suitcase - has been passed to Medvedev as Commander in Chief.

In the previous transitions, television reports provided evidence that Gorbachev and Yeltsin had relinquished control within hours of the inauguration.) And, as in the imperial court, today's rituals were performed primarily for the political elite - indeed, the normally bustling Red Square and nearby thoroughfares stood eerily empty, as the authorities closed traffic in central Moscow for the event.

¶3. (SBU) Approximately 2,000 members of the political class witnessed the handover of presidential power: legislators, judges, government bureaucrats, regional leaders, and the diplomatic corps. For some, including then Premier Zubkov, the inauguration marked the end of their tenure in office - as required by the constitution, the entire government proffered their resignations as Putin left power.

Presidential spouses played only a minor role, with a haggard Mrs. Putin and a beaming Mrs. Medvedev relegated to the sidelines. (A stately Mrs. Yeltsin was among the guests as well.)

Medvedev: Protecting Freedom, Fighting Legal Nihilism

¶4. (SBU) A confident Medvedev gave a short, two-minute inaugural address that hammered home his electoral platform of protecting the rights of the citizenry, promoting respect for the law, and facilitating economic innovation and growth.

Improving the effectiveness of Russia's legal system, he noted, would improve the country's economic and social life, allow for greater entrepreneurship, and strike a blow in the fight against corruption. Moreover, Medvedev said that adherence to the rule of law would help to strengthen Russia's role in the international community - perhaps an implicit acknowledgment that Moscow's standing had been undermined by its failure to establish a more institutionalized legal system. To achieve his ends, he committed himself to working with all "responsible" political forces, civil society organizations, and regional leaders.

¶5. (SBU) Medvedev closed his speech with his personal commitment to protecting Russian interests, both at home and abroad, as a daily, even hourly responsibility. He promised that he would do "everything possible so that the security of our citizens is not just guaranteed by the law, but is really ensured by the state." And lastly, he expressed his appreciation to Putin for his service as president and for his personal support over the years.

Putin's Victory Lap

¶6. (SBU) As expected, Putin played a prominent role today, reading his farewell address at the start of the ceremonies and afterwards standing alongside Medvedev as he received the

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salute of the presidential guard on freedom square. He read a short address to the nation, in which he patted himself on the back for leading Russia into a more stable and prosperous era and then offered his thanks for eight years of support and trust from the people. Press reports drew attention that unlike Yeltsin, who after resigning from his post months before attended his successor's inauguration as an ordinary citizen, Putin had a more auspicious role to play as president. Throughout the day, Putin struck a pensive pose, perhaps self-conscious of his role as the first "current president" to be present at an inauguration.

¶7. (SBU) Putin called on the nation to support Medvedev, seeing his inauguration as an opportunity to unite the country's political leadership. He charged his successor to continue the same course of development that "had proven itself" and was guided by the interests of the citizenry - essentially a rejoinder for his successor to continue with "Plan Putin" and the vision of the Russia 2020 agenda. In a final note that is sure to spark speculation about his plans for the future, Putin said that the obligation of "looking after Russia" was the highest civic duty (a probable reference to Yeltsin's charge to Putin to "look out for Russia") and promised he would continue to do so for the rest of his life.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) Given the climate of anxiety about the transition, Medvedev's inauguration will provide grist for the mills of speculation about the ultimate course of events. That Putin - a young, healthy, and popular leader - would step down willingly from the presidency seemed to some an unlikely scenario this time last year. Today it is a reality. Putin's prominent role in the ceremony, his "charge" to Medvedev to stay the course, and the image of the tandem standing together only minutes after Medvedev's triumphal solo march as President are sure to feed the theories of those who see Putin as shifting power to the Premiership. Others, however, could argue that Putin is only doing what he promised to do - offering Medvedev the protected space to

grow into the presidency during a period of benign regency.
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